

Breakfast program will feed more N.C. students

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PUBLISHED IN: STATE

DURHAM -- A new program aims to fight childhood hunger by expanding federally funded school breakfast to more children in North Carolina.

The program, dubbed "No Kid Hungry," will start with a pilot effort in 28 schools across the state, including Lakewood Elementary in Durham. Free breakfast will be offered widely, and it will be available in the classroom or in "grab and go" bags as children enter the school building in the morning. The program will also expand free meals to children in the summer.

The effort was announced Tuesday at the Durham school by Gov. Bev Perdue, Durham Mayor Bill Bell and two organizations - Share Our Strength, a national nonprofit, and NC Serves, a nonprofit in North Carolina.

"We all know breakfast is really the most important meal of the day, so if we can help our kids get a great start on the day, then they'll have a terrific finish and they'll end up being great students," Perdue said.

The goal is to encourage more children to take advantage of the federal School Breakfast Program. Of the 640,000 North Carolina students who get free or reduced-price lunch, fewer than half partake of free breakfast.

There are many reasons. Sometimes students are reluctant to go to the cafeteria in the morning, because of the stigma associated with free breakfast. Or buses are late and children don't have the time to eat before class starts.

Increasing the number of children in federal food programs would bring more money to the state. Last year, North Carolina could have brought more than \$27 million in federal money to communities in North Carolina with greater participation, according to one estimate.

Share Our Strength, a national nonprofit working to end childhood hunger, has similar partnerships in 14 other states and will launch four more this year. The organization is spending \$125,000 in North Carolina.

The launch

The children at Lakewood were treated to a lesson about eating a healthy breakfast by two Smurf mascots,

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Gov. Bev Perdue talks to third-graders Tuesday at Lakewood Elementary School in Durham. She was there launching the No Kid Hungry partnership campaign to increase the number of children who eat meals funded by the federal government.

who brought a giant grocery bag with plastic props - milk, orange juice, fresh fruit, cereal and toast.

Perdue gave a pep talk, too.

"What does (food) do to your brain?" she asked the children. "It helps you get smarter."

The event was held the same day new census statistics showed the poverty rate in the United States climbing to 15.1 percent in 2010, with 46 million Americans living in poverty.

"Ending poverty is difficult and complex; feeding a child is not," said Bill Shore, founder and executive director of Share Our Strength. "We know how to do that. Hunger is a problem with a solution."

It's worked

Schools that have successfully implemented breakfast in the classroom programs have produced higher test scores, better attendance rates and fewer behavior problems, according to the state Department of Public Instruction.

"This is not just an issue about kids being hungry," Shore said.

"It's an issue of kids being ready to learn when they're in the classroom.

"It's an education issue, it's a competitiveness issue."

Shore said similar partnerships have produced big results in other states, with tens of thousands of children added to school breakfast and summer meal programs.

"The federal money is set aside to pay for it. ... It's money that comes into North Carolina and buys milk from local dairy farmers, bread from local bakeries - so it's a win-win for everybody," he said.

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